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Bringing Some Clarity to the Media Bias Debate

Stephen D. Cooper

Kuypers J. A. (2002) *Press bias and politics: How the media frame controversial issues*. Westport, CT: Praeger. ISBN: 0275977595. \$24.95.

Perhaps one of the oddest debates in scholarly circles—at least, in recent times—has been that over the notion of press bias. It would seem that there is something of a tacit consensus that the news media do a poor job of conveying reality; at least, it would appear so from the plethora of journal articles critiquing reporting of various incidents, political campaigns, or issues, or from the plentiful works making the broader case that the press is in some way the structural tool of some particular interest group, ideology, or elite. The oddity about the debate is the direction in which the press is alleged to tilt, the supposed beneficiary of the press's favoritism. Does the presumed systematic bias in news coverage favor liberals? Or conservatives? Or free market capitalists? Or social reformers?

Jim A. Kuypers' recent book, *Press Bias and Politics*, has made a significant advance in the methodology of inquiring into this issue—although it's a safe bet that many in the scholarly community will be tempted to dismiss it out of hand. That's a shame, if so, because even if one is disinclined to accept Kuypers' conclusion that the press tends to favor ideas associated with the political left, his method can at least put the debate on a firmer footing.

A fundamental problem with considering media bias as a scholarly question—rather than a polemical opportunity—is operationalizing the construct of press bias. Some have used the personal politics of newswriters as an indicator of bias. The classic Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter study (1990) took this approach, for instance; it showed the members of the press corps to be far more liberal, in their personal viewpoints, than the population as a whole. Others have pointed to the industrial organization of news outlets as a structural bias inherent in the production of news material; this is central in the Herman and Chomsky classic (1988), which sees the news industry as a guardian of capitalism and a mechanism for maintaining a so-called false consciousness on the part of the public. Yet another line of thinking compares news content with some normative ideal or social reform initiative; Parenti's critique (1993) is an example, which chronicles lost opportunities for the press to serve what he sees as virtuous social causes. To complicate the matter further, ongoing content analyses come streaming out of various watchdog groups, such as the Media Research Center (<http://www.media->

research.org/) and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (<http://www.fair.org/>). It's no surprise that they report diametrically opposed findings, the MRC observing a liberal bias and FAIR observing a conservative bias!

The methodological dilemma isn't confined to the scholarly works on the subject. Unlike many other scholarly debates, the media bias issue resonates with the public, as the Pew Research Center's surveys continue to show (2004), and popular works on the subject are plentiful. Bernard Goldberg's *Bias* (2003) is a journalist's memoir, the story of how his heterodoxy—penning an op-ed critical of another journalist's political favoritism—cost him his career as a top broadcast news reporter. Eric Alterman's *What Liberal Media?* (2003) amounts to a rebuttal of Goldberg's thesis that the mainstream news media are hostile to conservative ideas. Both are interesting insider's looks at the news process, and have sold a good number of copies. It doesn't seem that they've nudged the readers, either academicians or the public at large, toward a common understanding, though. A metaphor of two choirs with radically different hymnbooks comes to mind here.

Perhaps Kuypers' method can bring some welcome clarity to this debate. *Press Bias and Politics* is a series of case studies of recent public speeches which all generated substantial news coverage. The speakers, topics, and contexts are an interesting assortment, not readily categorizable, overall, as favoring either pole of the political spectrum: Alabama State Senator Charles Davidson, on flying the Confederate battle flag over the state capitol building; President Bill Clinton on his Initiative on Race; Minister Louis Farrakhan's remarks at the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C.; football star Reggie White's address to the Wisconsin state legislature on Urban Hope, a charitable organization he founded; Mississippi Senator Trent Lott's interview on the Armstrong Williams radio show; and President Bill Clinton's remarks to a fund-raiser for the Human Rights Campaign.

In each of the six case studies, Kuypers begins with a framing analysis of the speech itself, identifying the main themes and propositions contained in the texts. Kuypers then does a framing analysis of news stories and opinion pieces covering those same speeches. Each case concludes with a comparison of the frames in the speech with the frames in the press coverage. It is important to note the strength of this method, when the research question at hand concerns the fidelity of news coverage to the events it reports. Of course, one may construe the construct, bias, in a variety of ways and hence measure it in a variety of ways (cataloged above; see also Cooper, 1994, *in press*), but certainly this would be a reasonable take on it: when the event is a text—the words of a speech or interview remarks—then a comparison of the meanings in that text with the meanings in reporting about it will give good indications of whether there is some systematic distortion of meanings as the event goes through the news reporting process.

There are several obvious advantages to this method over earlier inquiry into the press bias issue. It directly measures the reporting, and hence avoids the assumption—however reasonable it may be—that the demographics or shared cultural backgrounds of newswriters necessarily constrain their products. It also avoids the quagmire of comparing news products to some sort of normative ideal—however reasonable that ideal may be—hence it's irrelevant to Kuypers' method whether the press ought to oppose capitalism, or support regulatory intervention of some sort into existing social structures, or even cover particular kinds of events and ignore other events.

In terms of the knowledge claims one might make from a study with this design, it is useful to note how this approach resembles a field experiment (described succinctly in Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992). The actual text of the speech and the reporting about the speech are analogous to subjects; the framing analyses of the text and the reporting are the pre- and post-tests performed on the subjects. The news process, in this design, is analogous to the naturally-occurring treatment to which the subjects are exposed. Just as the knowledge claim of a single group experiment design rests on the comparison of the subjects before and after the treatment, Kuypers' claim that the press exhibits a systematic liberal bias when reporting on socially controversial issues rests on the claim that the frames in the reporting of the speeches are substantially different to the frames in the actual speeches themselves, in ways congenial to a contemporary liberal viewpoint.

In the same vein, it is useful to note the limitations the method imposes on the knowledge claims. There are six speeches examined, in depth, as case studies. Just as the subject pool in a field experiment limits, to some degree, the generalizability of the findings to the larger world, one might reasonably question how representative these six speeches are of news stories in general. However, this limitation would not be cause, *prima facie*, to reject Kuypers' findings, any more than one would reject all experimental research in communication, out of hand. In this light it is important to note that Kuypers does not claim that this work is an exhaustive content analysis of news products; rather, he points out that "the purpose of this book is to understand and chart the potential effects the printed press—and by extension, broadcast media—have upon the messages of political and social leaders when they discuss controversial issues" (p. 2). In short, the book makes a knowledge claim which is carefully limited in a way suitable to the research design.

In the final analysis, Kuypers is saying something in *Press Bias and Politics* which is very much like what New York Times public editor Daniel Okrent (2004) said about his own newspaper: When the press covers a social controversy, it tends to take sides. It's a point worth considering.

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